

### Happiness as an expression of freedom and self-determination: a comparative multilevel analysis

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

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#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Haller, M., & Hadler, M. (2004). Happiness as an expression of freedom and self-determination: a comparative multilevel analysis. In W. Glatzer, S. v. Below, & M. Stoffregen (Eds.), *Challenges for quality of life in the contemporary world: advances in quality-of-life studies and research* (pp. 207-231). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publ. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-235210>

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# 14. HAPPINESS AS AN EXPRESSION OF FREEDOM AND SELF-DETERMINATION

## *A Comparative Multilevel Analysis*

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, subjective well-being, as measured by survey questions on life satisfaction and happiness, is investigated from a sociological-comparative point of view. The central thesis is that happiness will be greater the more freedom a person has in her/his life decisions. It is hypothesized, therefore, that happiness will be higher in all those social contexts (micro and macro) which provide a person with greater freedom. Hence, happiness should be higher among the employed, among persons in higher positions and with higher incomes, and happiness should also be higher in free market and democratic, and in less stratified societies. A comparative empirical analysis (multilevel regression) is carried out, using survey data on 41 nations from the *World Value Survey 1995-97*. The finding that happiness is related significantly to the degree of individual freedom is fully confirmed. It also has been proven that people who live in circumstances providing more freedom of personal choice are happier. However, macro-social conditions are not directly relevant for personal freedom and happiness; this happens only through their perception and through their expected change (improvement or stagnation) in the future.

### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, happiness has become a topic investigated intensively by social psychologists (Argyle, 1987; Michalos, 1991; Myers, 1993; Kahnemann & Diener, 1999), sociologists (Veenhoven, 1989; 1993; Bellebaum, 1992), political scientists (Lane, 2000) and economists (Frey & Stutzer, 2002). Already in the Sixties, large-scale empirical surveys on mental health and the subjective quality of life of the population have been carried out in the United States (Gurin et al., 1960; Bradburn, 1969); recently, in many advanced countries regular surveys on subjective quality of life have been established (Campbell, 1981; Glatzer & Zapf, 1984). The relevance of happiness from the personal, social-scientific and political-practical perspectives is evident (see also Veenhoven, 1994, pp. 102f.; Diener, 2000; Frey & Stutzer, 2002). To become and to remain happy is a fundamental goal and right of any human acknowledged not only by the political philosophy of utilitarianism. Thus, striving towards happiness has been embodied as a fundamental human right into the venerable constitution of the United States; today, many governments consider the advancement of happiness of their peoples at a primary political goal; the focus on

economic growth is seen as the best means to achieve that goal (Eckersley, 2000, p. 4). Finally, empirical research has shown that happiness has positive consequences for other areas of human behavior, such as an increased openness and commitment of adolescents (Magen, 1996), increased chances of finding a job among unemployed (Verkley & Stolk, 1989) and the increase of life expectancy of middle- and older aged people (Deeg & van Zonneveld, 1989; Veenhoven, 1989).

In this paper, we take a sociological perspective which starts from the basic assumption that happiness must be seen as a concomitant and consequence of specific human action and their embedding into social structures. This perspective which may seem obvious at first sight, in fact has been considered only very seldom. Let us try to elaborate it in more detail and to deduce some testable hypotheses from it.

### THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

We do not assume that men are sluggish beings which must be "driven" to become active as theories of motivation usually do. Rather, we take it for granted that they – as all other creatures – are active by nature. Therefore, we must focus on the diversity and variability of action, and investigate the forms, preconditions and consequences of certain kinds of actions. This fundamental and simple idea which was central to the thinking of G. H. Mead, Max Weber and others (see Campbell, 1998; Haller, 2003) has far-reaching consequences.

First, it is a central element of human action – in contrast to pure "behavior" among animals – that it has a certain intent, a meaning. Through human action – which must be seen as a conscious and purposeful act – men try to realize some aim. Such an act requires a certain margin of decision, a certain degree of freedom. The broader this margin, the better the individual will be able to decide between the alternatives before him. In this perspective, the perennial, contested question of human sciences and philosophy, if men are free or not, is seen from a wholly new perspective. We take it as an axiological principle that an action must be free if it should be called „human“ (see also Fromm, 1956; Boudon, 1999). This principle, however, is not a statement about every single human act. There exists also behavior which proceeds in a more or less automatic manner, such as everyday routine or traditional behavior (in Weber's terms) or behavior responding more or less automatically to internal or external stimuli (such as a pure affective behavior). Only if a certain act is carried out intentionally and with a specific aim, does freedom come in. Even such an action, however, can be enforced by others or circumstances to a certain degree. The basic assumption of our paper therefore is: If a human act has been carried out by free decision, and without external enforcement or constraint, it is gratifying per se because it deploys the essence of humans, the ability to act in a conscious, deliberate and reflexive manner.

If we see satisfaction with one's life as a whole as the highest form of happiness (Nozick, 1989), then it becomes also evident that freedom plays a decisive role. How could somebody really be happy with an over-directed life? This argument is in line with several socio-psychological findings. Doyle and Youn (2000, p. 207) report that a number of personality characteristics which influenced happiness are united by a freedom/control dimension. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has shown that the highest feelings of personal happiness and fulfillment (connected typically with absent-mindedness) result if a person is fully involved into a self-selected and

demanding task or activity (see also Deci & Ryan, 1985). Our hypothesis is also in line with A. Sen's (1999) concept of "capabilities" which in essence means the degree of actual freedom of a person to lead a specific, self-chosen style of life (see also Sève, 1972).

From this simple and basic thesis, straightforward conclusions can be drawn about the significance of particular kinds of social behavior and action in different domains of life. The second general assumption of this paper, therefore, is that happiness should arise out of all those forms of actions, and in all those spheres of life, where the individual has at least some degree of freedom to decide. Free action is usually motivated intrinsically, by an inherent tendency to use knowledge and capacities to seek novelty and challenges (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It follows that the attainment of happiness will be easier in all those economic, social and political contexts and it will be facilitated by all those institutions which provide the individual with possibilities of participation, which give him the feeling that he has some personal influence and discretion on the events happening around him. Hannah Arendt (1958) has reminded us that in classical Greek philosophy political freedom was a precondition for the attainment of happiness (*eudaimonia*) which on its side was closely connected with health and prosperity. For the Greeks, freedom, a characteristic of the political sphere (as opposed to the private household), was closely related to equality between the citizens. This was a central point also in Alexis de Tocqueville's classical work on *Democracy in America* (Tocqueville, 1947). Thus, societal structures of opportunity and inequality play an important role in this regard.

As far as the personal and societal conditions for the exertion of free action are concerned, a twofold process will be at work. First, conditions and contexts will facilitate autonomous lines of action which will also increase individual happiness. From this point of view, an adequate job and income as well as good health will be important since they increase individuals' "capabilities" (Sen, 1999). Second, conditions and contexts which provide good opportunities in the future for those who find themselves in adverse situations will be conducive to happiness. Disadvantaged people then will have the feeling that they can look forward to and eventually move on into contexts providing better opportunities for personal freedom and advancement (Diener & Suh, 1997, p. 204). Thus, the future prospects of an individual might be as important or even more important than his/her present situation. Nobody would classify a student as "poor", even if his actual income falls below the statistical poverty line. Similarly, economic growth providing many new jobs and increasing the income of everybody, might have more positive effects than a high, but static level of wealth.

Based on these general considerations, four specific hypotheses are put forward:

- (1) Happiness of individuals will be greater, the more they feel that they have a considerable degree of freedom of decision in their life and thus can control their destiny.
- (2) Happiness will be higher in personal, social and macro-societal situations and contexts which accord individuals more opportunities for free decision. Here, we expect that gainful employment, a higher occupational position and higher income lead to more happiness, as well as a higher standard of living of a country as a whole. In all these regards we expect also that the subjective perception of present and future individual and societal conditions will be important.



- (3) The variation of happiness between nations will reflect their economic, stratification and political order. In countries with a growing economy and positive socioeconomic prospects, with open and transparent stratification systems, and with economic and political systems where citizens are free to express and put forth their interests, happiness will be higher than in nations where political suppression, rigid social hierarchies and non-transparent, clientelistic systems of economic exchange and social advancement prevail. This will be so because in the latter, wealth and privileges often must be attributed to external forces, unalterable by individual effort.
- (4) Social class and status differences in happiness should be larger in more unequal societies and in countries with less open and free economic and political systems.

#### EMPIRICAL RESULTS FROM THE WORLD VALUE SURVEY 1995-97

What we can present here, is only a partial test of the general theses developed in the foregoing section. Since the focus of this paper is on happiness in the comparative view, we must look primarily at international surveys. It was a felicitous circumstance that in the *World Value Survey* 1995-97 (WVS 95) questions on both dimensions – feeling of freedom and happiness – have been included which are relevant from the theoretical perspective developed here.<sup>1</sup> A limitation arises from the fact that this survey – as most others on “happiness” – has not been carried out within the framework of the theory developed here. A direct test of our theory would require an in-depth investigation of the actual processes of human action and a detailed grasping of the aims connected to certain lines of actions. It would also necessitate a differentiated coverage of the concept of “freedom” whose meaning might vary somewhat between different countries and cultures. Our indicators (questions) capturing freedom and happiness, as well as socio-demographic variables, like sex, age or marital status, are only approximations of the actual life circumstances of a respondent. We cannot expect, therefore, that the effect of these variables on happiness will be very strong.

In the following subsection, the data set and items used are described; then, the results of the analysis of feeling free are presented, followed by those of happiness at the individual and the macro-social level.

##### *a) Data Sets, Questions and Indicators, and Method of Analysis*

The *World Value Survey* (WVS) is one of the few regular, large and international comparative surveys. Beginning in the early 1980ies, it has already been carried out three times in dozens of nations around the world (Inglehart et al., 2000). Its aim is to provide an empirical base for the study of social and cultural change among the populations of the different nations. The strengths of this project are obvious: It provides a unique and rich database for international comparisons of attitudes and values; it covers the whole range of basic social attitudes and its replication enables the recording of value changes over time (Bréchon, 2002). However, there also exist limitations of the WVS. One is the fact that – due to its coverage of a broad array of social attitudes and values – specific dimensions often can be grasped only with a single or a few questions.<sup>2</sup> Another one is the fact that for some large countries (e.g.

Russia, China, and others) only certain provinces were randomly sampled; these provinces tend to be the more urban and rich ones.<sup>3</sup>

The WVS 1995-97, which is used here, included about 70 different states, regions and cities around the world. After combining the sub-regions contained in the aggregated data set into one single country where necessary<sup>4</sup>, 49 countries remained. Because of many missing values in important variables, several countries had to be excluded. Finally, 41 countries could be used for the multilevel regression analysis.

Our main dependent variables were captured by three questions. The following question (V66) grasps directly the dimension of subjective freedom of control:

"Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use this scale where 1 means 'none at all' and 10 means 'a great deal' to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out:

1 ('Not at all') [...] 10 ('A great deal')"

Two questions were asked about happiness and life satisfaction:

"(V10) Taking all things together, would you say you are: very happy (1), quite happy (2), not very happy (3), not at all happy (4)";

"(V65) All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Please use this card for your answer:

1 ('Dissatisfied') [...] 10 ('Satisfied')"

Both these questions will be used as separate dependent variables in the following analysis, assuming that they – by and large – are measuring a similar dimension. Since they were asked at different places in the questionnaire the degree of correspondence in the results may be interpreted as an indicator of their validity.

We use the method of multilevel regression analysis in order to distinguish in a methodologically sound way between the effects of characteristics of the individuals (individual level) and the effects of characteristics of the countries as a whole (macro level). A multilevel analysis has several advantages over a simple regression analysis where no distinction between individual and macro-social characteristics is made (Goldstein, 1995, p. 3): First, it results in statistically efficient estimates of the regression coefficients; second, by using the context data (country characteristics), it produces correct standard errors, confidence intervals and significance tests, and these are usually more "conservative" than those obtained with an ordinary regression; third, by allowing the use of covariates measured at both levels, it enables one to explore interaction effects. Thus, one can investigate if the effects of an individual socioeconomic characteristic, such as income, on happiness are the same in all countries compared. For our statistical analysis, we used the program MLwiN (Rabash et al., 2000).

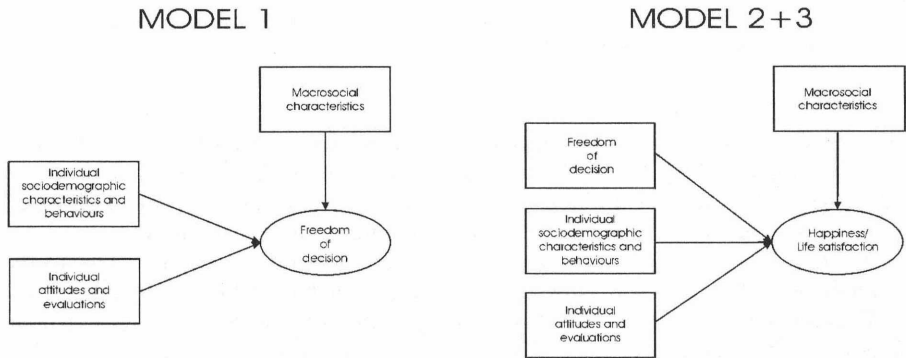
Three kinds of determinants of the dependent variable "freedom of decision" are distinguished here (see figure 1 and table 1):

*Sociodemographic individual characteristics and behaviors:* age and gender, education, employment participation and occupational status, income, marital status and presence of children; religious denomination and participation; membership in voluntary associations; these variables are related to the individual life situation of the respondents;

*Attitudes and subjective evaluations;* here, the following indicators were available: subjective social class placement, subjective health situation, satisfaction with financial situation, how often respondents think about the meaning of life, how the choices to escape poverty are perceived, altruistic orientation;

*Macro-social indicators,* that is, characteristics of the countries compared; By decomposing the global “black-box” variable “country” into a set of specific variables, it becomes possible to give a meaningful interpretation to differences between countries (Przeworski/Teune, 1970; Haller, 2002). Four macro-social characteristics of the countries were included: Level of economic development or wealth (GNP/head), economic growth during the Nineties (GDP/growth), income distribution (GINI coefficients) and degree of political freedom. The latter indicator was taken from a data set compiled by Freedom House, New York; it varies between 1 (fully free) to 8 (no freedom).<sup>5</sup> In this index, most Western-European and Anglo-Saxon countries have scores indicating high freedom (below 2); then follow Latin-American and post-communist countries (values 2-4); at the end we find China, Nigeria, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Belarus and Peru (over 5.0).<sup>6</sup>

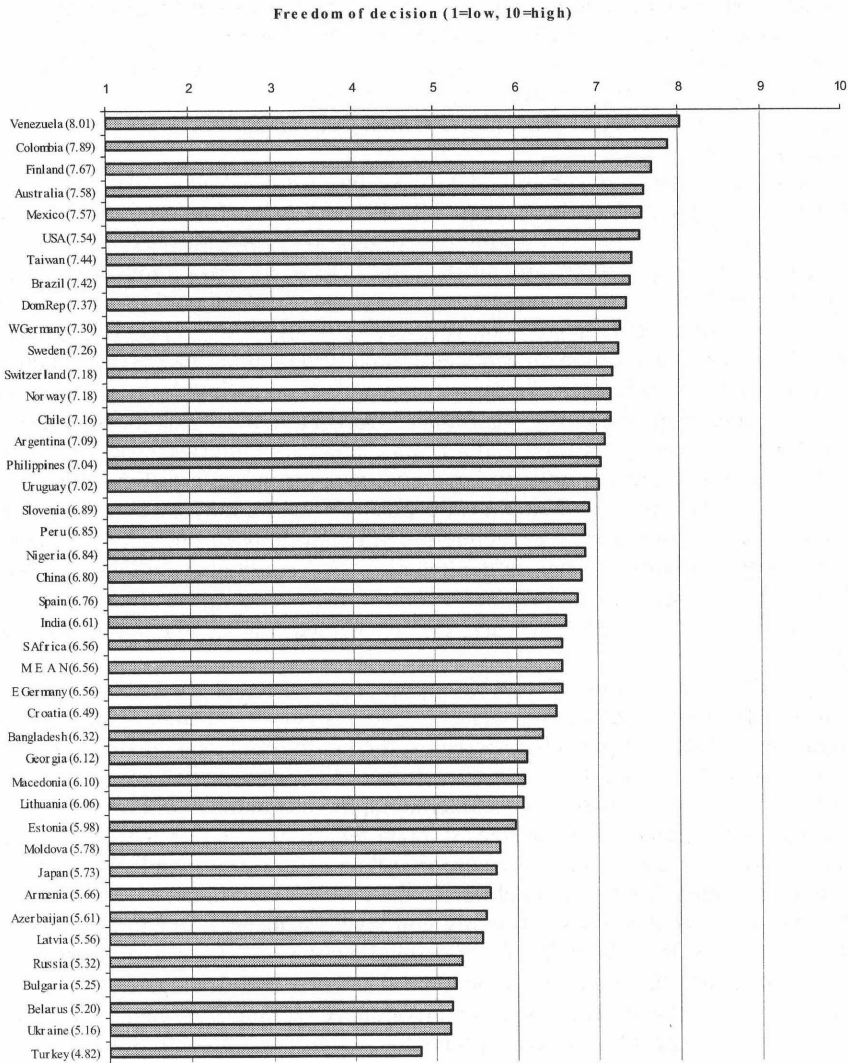
Figure 1: The Multilevel Regression Models (Overview)



In the multilevel analysis, three models are estimated (see figure 1). In the first model, freedom of decision is taken as a dependent variable; in the second and third model life satisfaction and happiness, respectively, are the dependent variables.

*b) Individual Social and Macro Structural Determinants of the Feeling of Freedom*

In this section, we present the findings on the individual- and macro-level determinants of the feeling of being free in one’s own life. First, let us look at the distribution of this variable in the 41 countries compared.

*Figure 2: Freedom of Decision in 41 Countries (Mean Values)*

Source: World Value Survey 1995.

Figure 2 shows that there exist indeed significant international differences in this important dimension. The feeling of freedom was measured on a ten-point scale, 1 indicating none at all and 10 a high level of freedom. The mean value over the whole sample was 6.56, indicating an overall positive estimation. The international differences are considerable: On top, in Venezuela, the mean value is 8, but on bot-

tom, in Turkey, it is only 4.82. Three groups of countries stand out with a very high level of subjectively felt freedom: Firstly, some advanced North Western European and Anglo-Saxon countries (Finland, Australia, and the United States); secondly – rather surprising – three Latin American countries; two of these – Venezuela and Colombia – are in fact on top of all; thirdly, Taiwan. In most of these countries, the mean value is above 7.30. The lowest values emerge in the post-communist Eastern European countries and in the successor states of the Soviet Union. Within this group, the higher developed nations, like Slovenia and Croatia, are about in the middle, and the lower developed ones, like Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and Bulgaria, on the bottom.

Two of these findings correspond to what one would expect: Market societies and democratic institutions have been established for the longest time and most firmly in North-Western Europe and in the Anglo-Saxon countries and these are also among the wealthiest nations around the world. In many post-communist Eastern European and Asian societies, however, free market and democratic institutions are of very recent origin and often do not work very effectively till today. Together with the dramatic worsening of the objective economic situation in those countries during the 1990ies (Haller & Hadler, 2002), this explains the very low level in the feeling of being in control of one's own life. Rather surprising, however, is the high level of the feeling of personal freedom in the Latin American countries, where socio-economic inequality is often extremely large and democracy had a difficult fate in the last decades. One aspect correlated to this positive feeling may be that these countries experienced considerable economic growth as well as an opening and liberalization of their economic system in the Nineties. This could also explain the feeling of having a high degree of freedom and control in Asian countries like Taiwan (its value of 7.44 lies between Germany and the United States), the Philippines and China.

The multivariate multilevel regression gives more exact answers about the possible causes for these large international differences. Let us look, first, at the effects of individual sociodemographic characteristics, then at those of several subjective perceptions and attitudes and, finally, at the effects of the macro variables.

Table 1 shows that nearly all sociodemographic characteristics exert significant influence on the feeling of being free. Women feel to be less free than men; young people (below 29 years) feel to be more free than older ones; people with children feel more free than those without children; the unemployed, housewives and retired feel to be less free than those presently employed; managers feel to be more, the unskilled less free than the bulk of non-manual employees; those with high income feel more free than those with lower income. The latter two findings clearly support our hypotheses in this regard. The more pronounced feeling of freedom among men and among young people also corresponds to everyday experience. Somewhat contrary to our general assumption is the fact that people with children feel to be more free; we will see later, that close relationships to other people constitute an additional, independent source of happiness.

*Table 1: Multilevel Regression Analysis of Freedom of Decision in 41 countries*

	B	SE	Beta
<i>Sociodemographic Characteristics</i>			
Constant	6.26**	0.48	0
Women (Ref=Men)	-0.14**	0.02	-0.03
Age (-29)	0.14**	0.04	0.02
Age (30-39)	0.06	0.03	0.01
Age (40-49) (Ref)	-	-	-
Age (50-59)	-0.03	0.04	0
Age (60-69)	0.01	0.05	0
Age (70-)	0.1	0.06	0.01
Education (Low-High)	-0.01	0.01	0
Married (Ref)	-	-	-
Divorced, Separated, Widowed	0.05	0.03	0.01
Single	0.04	0.04	0.01
Children (No.s 1-4+)	0.03*	0.01	0.01
No Children or Missing Value	-0.04*	0.02	-0.01
<i>Employment Status</i>			
Employed (Ref)			
Retired	-0.19**	0.04	-0.02
Housewife	-0.11**	0.04	-0.01
Student	-0.07	0.05	-0.01
Unemployed	-0.08*	0.04	-0.01
Not Employed/Missing	-0.09	0.05	-0.01
<i>Occupational Position</i>			
Non Manual (Ref)	-	-	-
Manager	0.09*	0.04	0.01
Skilled Worker	-0.04	0.03	-0.01
Semi Skilled Worker	-0.12**	0.03	-0.02
Farmer	-0.04	0.06	0
Army	-0.19**	0.07	-0.01
Never Worked	-0.19**	0.04	-0.03
Income (Low-High)	0.02**	0.01	0.02



*Table 1: Multilevel Regression Analysis of Freedom of Decision in 41 countries (continued)*

<i>Religious Denomination</i>			
Catholic (Ref)	-	-	-
None	-0.08*	0.04	-0.01
Protestant	0.10**	0.04	0.01
Orthodox	0.04	0.04	0.01
Jew	-0.23**	0.09	-0.01
Muslim	-0.01	0.07	0
Other (Mainly Buddhist, Hindu, and other Asian Religions)	0.09	0.05	0.01
Interaction: Female-Muslim	-0.54**	0.07	-0.04
<i>Individual Attitudes and Behavior</i>			
Church Attendance (Often-Never)	0.02**	0.01	0.02
Voluntary Membership (No-Many)	0.04	0.03	0.01
Subjective Class (High-Low)	-0.12**	0.03	-0.04
Subjective Health (Bad-Good)	-0.25**	0.01	-0.1
Financial Satisfaction (Low-High)	0.23**	0	0.26
Think about Meaning of Life (Often-Never)	-0.11**	0.01	-0.04
Poverty Increased Last 10 Years (Not-Much)	-0.03	0.02	-0.01
Other/Own Preferences (Ref=other)	0.01	0.02	0
No Chance to Escape Poverty (Ref=Chance)	-0.19**	0.02	-0.04
<i>Country Characteristics</i>			
Political Freedom (High-Low)	-0.07	0.06	-0.06
GNP*1000 (Low-High)	0	0.01	-0.01
Gini-Index (Low-High)	0.01	0.01	0.06
Growth of GDP (Low-High)	0.04*	0.02	0.08
$R^2_{\text{makro}}$		0.678	
$R^2_{\text{total}}$		0.156	
N		64,605	

Source: World Value Survey 1995; own calculations. If an item was not asked in a country or not answered by a respondent, a dummy is included but not shown here.

Also religious affiliation and church attendance have significant effects. Catholics and Jews, as well as persons who often think about the meaning of life, feel to be less free in their decisions. The opposite is true for protestants and people who do not go to church. A very interesting and plausible interaction effect turned out in regard to gender and religion: Female Muslims feel significantly less frequent that they are free in their decisions.

Significant and often quite strong effects emanate from most of those items which concern the subjective perception of one's social position and life situation.

The feeling of being free is more widespread among those who assign themselves to higher social classes; among people who feel to be in good health; and among those who are satisfied with their financial situation.

A set of three additional individual attitudes in table 1 is related to social perceptions concerning our hypothesis 2, the stratification system of a society. Two questions were related to the perception of inequality and poverty in the immediate past and to the chances of poor people to improve their lot in the future (Items V171 and V173):

"Would you say that today a larger share, about the same share, or a smaller share of the people of this country are living in poverty than were ten years ago?"

"In your opinion, do most poor people in this country have a chance of escaping from poverty, or is there very little chance of escaping?"

Table 1 shows that the estimation of changes in the overall societal amount of poverty during the last ten years does not have any effect on the feeling of personal freedom. The estimation of the present chances of poor people to escape their lot, however, does have such effects. Persons who think that poor people in general have good chances to escape from poverty, feel that they themselves are in a better position to decide about important issues in their life.

Finally, let us look at the question of what determines freedom in the macro perspective. A lot of earlier research has shown that nations differ significantly in the mean level of happiness of their populations. We have shown that this is also true for the feeling of being free. It is a central tenet of our approach, however, to posit not only an overall "nationality" or "culture effect" on freedom and happiness (Inkeles, 1989; Inglehart & Rabier, 1986, p. 34ff.). Such an effect would be difficult to interpret. Rather, we decompose the variable nation into several specific, theoretically meaningful and measurable components (see Przeworski & Teune, 1970 and Haller, 2002 for this strategy). In our theoretical considerations we introduced three dimensions in this regard: wealth of a nation, economic inequality and political freedom.

Table 1 shows that the effects of these macro-social dimensions on the feeling of being free in one's own life are rather modest. Neither political freedom and the socioeconomic level of development (GNP per head), nor national income distribution (inequality) have significant effects on the feeling of being personally free in the daily decisions. Only growth of GDP over the last years has a significant (albeit only weak) positive effect on the feeling of personal freedom.

Summarizing these findings we may say that most of our hypotheses on the determinants of individual feelings of freedom have been supported. This was particularly true for the variables concerning employment and occupation; it was also true for the items on the subjective perception of one's status and life circumstances. Only a partial confirmation, however, was found for the hypotheses on the macro-social determinants of individual feelings of being free.

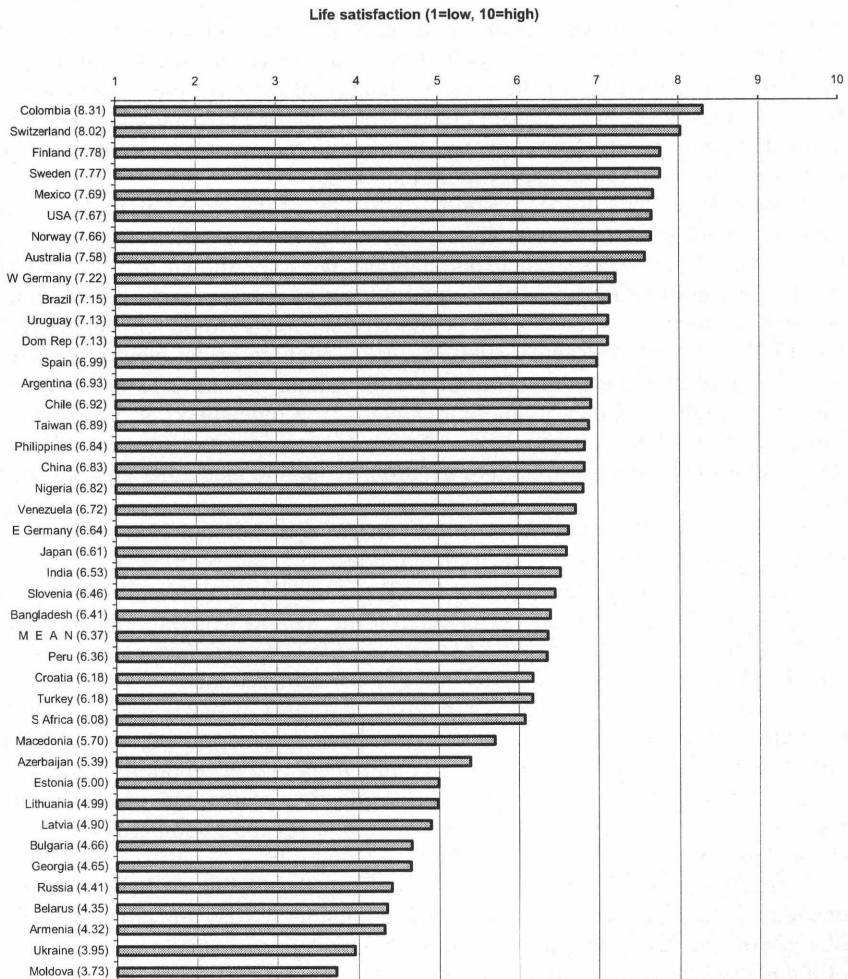
Two explanations might exist for this. First, the feeling of being in control of one's own daily life seems to be determined mainly by the immediate life situation of a person and his or her family. Second, the objective social structure and situation of a country seems to become relevant for the individual feeling of being free only through the subjective perception of the objective situation.

Now, let us go on to look at the factors which determine happiness and life satisfaction.

*c) Personal and Social Circumstances Conducive to Happiness and Life Satisfaction*

First, let us have a look at the distribution of life satisfaction over the 42 countries (see figure 3).

*Figure 3: Life Satisfaction in 41 Countries (Mean Values)*



Source: World Value Survey 1995.

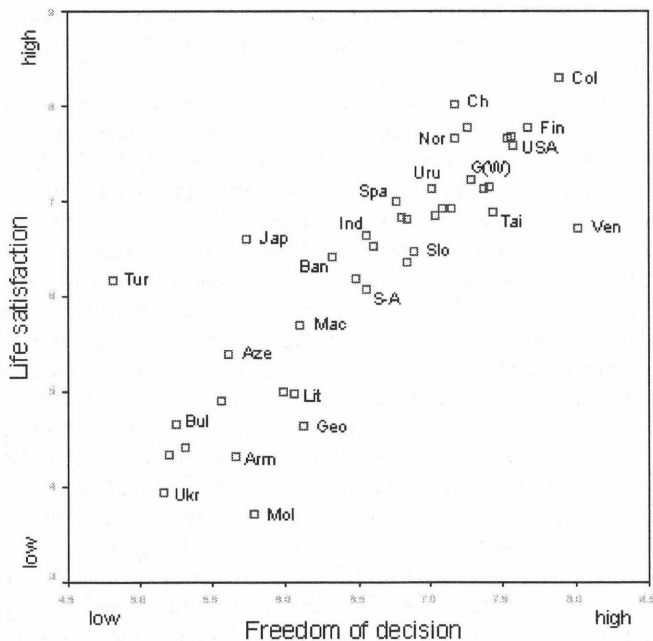
Here, we can see an even wider variation than in the case of freedom and self-control. The lowest value, found in Moldavia, is 3.73 (on the ten-point scale with 1 as the lowest, 10 as the highest value), the highest as much as 8.31 (found in Colombia). The general rank order of countries is rather similar to that in the degree of freedom, but not in all cases.

Again, a Latin American country, Colombia, lies on top with a mean satisfaction value of 8.31. This is indeed very high, 2 points above the overall mean (6.37). Next come two Scandinavian countries (Finland and Sweden), the USA and Australia. With some distance, West Germany and other Latin American countries follow. On the bottom of this scale, we find only the poorer post-communist countries: Moldova and the Ukraine show the lowest values (below 4) which indicate an overall rather negative evaluation of life (the median of the 10 point scale in life satisfaction is 5.5 points). If we compare the WVS-data of the mid-Nineties on happiness of nations with other data, the position of several single countries may be somewhat different. However, the main order of ranking does not differ: We always find the rich West-European and Anglo-Saxon countries on top, and the post-communist as well as very poor countries of the Third World on the bottom; the same is true for the conspicuously high position of the Latin-American countries (see Inglehart & Rabier, 1986; Veenhoven, 1993; Schyns, 1998; Diener, 2000; Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Vittersø et al., 2002). The rank order of the countries corresponds by and large with the objective life situation in these countries, albeit one clear exception exists. This is the very high level of life satisfaction in the Latin American countries whose level of development is rather modest and which are also characterized by high degrees of internal inequality, as well as many economic, social and political problems.

Let us now look at the central relationship, investigated in this paper. Figure 4 presents a scattergram of the relation between feeling of freedom and life satisfaction at the macro level.<sup>7</sup> We see a rather linear, strong association here; the Pearson correlation coefficient is .85. Thus, the first hypothesis of this paper is clearly confirmed also at this level of observation: In nations, where people feel to have a lot of freedom to decide about their own life, they are also happier. From this point of view, there seems to exist no contradiction between modernization, increase of freedom and individualism on the one, and happiness on the other hand (see also Veenhoven 1999; Boudon 1999).

A few countries deviate somewhat from the general pattern of a nearly linear relation between freedom and happiness: Especially in Turkey, but also in Japan, people feel to have relatively little freedom, compared to their life satisfaction; in Moldavia, Georgia, and Venezuela, people are less happy than one would expect based on their level of freedom of decision. We might note here that Turkey is the only Muslim society in our sample. As far as Japan is concerned, this finding corresponds to the fact that personal affiliation and dependence on authorities (the principle of "Amae") is a central characteristic of Japanese society (Doi, 1973).

Figure 4: Freedom of Decision and Life Satisfaction in 41 Countries



Source: World Value Survey 1995.

After this first, descriptive analysis we have to make sure that the central effects hold true even after controlling for other possible influences (see table 2). As far as the individual level variables are concerned, we describe and discuss only the effects of those variables which have been included in our hypotheses since they are also related to the feeling of individual freedom. These variables include employment participation and occupational status, income and a series of items related to subjective perception and evaluation of personal life circumstances.

*Employment participation and occupational status: The deprivation of the unemployed and of unskilled workers.* Work is one of the main bases for self-identity in modern society, and unemployment one of the most frequently occurring undesirable situations. In the foregoing section we found that all groups of the non-employed reported less freedom and self-control than the employed. The findings show also several significant effects of the employment situation on happiness. Housewives, students and the retired are happier, only the unemployed are less happy than employed persons. The findings for housewives and the retired are surprising since they are in the opposite direction as those on subjective freedom. Evidently, women who are not employed outside of the house have sources of satisfaction within the household and family which more than compensate for gainful work. A similar consideration may apply to retired people: While they certainly have less money, and less possibilities to participate in decisions, they have more time to spend with their relatives and hobbies, and, when they have reduced their material aspirations, they can lead a more quiet life.

Table 2: Multilevel Regression Analysis of Happiness and Life Satisfaction in 41 Countries

	Happiness (Low-High)			Life Satisfaction (Low-High)		
	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta
Constant	-2.01**	0.13	0.00	3.62**	0.28	0.00
<i>Employment Status</i>						
Employed (Ref)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Retired	0.04**	0.01	0.02	0.09**	0.03	0.01
Housewife	0.06**	0.01	0.03	0.07**	0.03	0.01
Student	0.04**	0.01	0.01	0.11**	0.04	0.01
Unemployed	-0.04**	0.01	-0.01	-0.17**	0.03	-0.02
Not employed/ Missing	0.07**	0.01	0.02	0.16**	0.03	0.02
<i>Occupational Position</i>						
Non Manual (Ref)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Manager	0.01	0.01	0.00	-0.04	0.03	-0.00
Skilled Worker	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.00
Semi Skilled Worker	-0.02**	0.01	-0.01	-0.05**	0.02	-0.01
Farmer	-0.00	0.02	-0.00	-0.01	0.05	-0.00
Army	-0.00	0.02	-0.00	0.02	0.03	0.00
Never Worked	-0.01	0.01	-0.00	0.02	0.03	0.00
Income (Low-High)	0.00	0.00	0.01	-0.00	0.00	-0.00
<i>Individual Attitudes and Behavior</i>						
Subjective Class (High-Low)	-0.05**	0.00	-0.08	-0.1**	0.01	-0.05
Subjective Health (Bad-Good)	-0.21**	0.00	-0.28	-0.37**	0.01	-0.15
Financial Satisfaction (Low-High)	0.05**	0.00	0.20	0.44**	0.00	0.49
Decision Freedom (Low-High)	0.03**	0.00	0.11	0.18**	0.00	0.20
Poverty Increased Lat 10 Years (Not-Much)	-0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00
No Chance to Escape Poverty (Ref=Chance)	-0.05**	0.01	-0.03	-0.13**	0.02	-0.02



*Table 2: Multilevel Regression Analysis of Happiness and Life Satisfaction in 41 Countries (continued)*

<i>Country Characteristics</i>						
Political Freedom (High-Low)	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.00
GNP*1000	0.01**	0.00	0.10	0.02*	0.01	0.07
Gini-Index (Low-High)	0.01**	0.00	0.07	0.01	0.01	0.03
Growth of GDP (Low-High)	0.01**	0.01	0.09	0.05**	0.01	0.10
$R^2_{\text{macro}}$	0.820			0.953		
$R^2_{\text{total}}$	0.279			0.488		
N	66,456			69,265		

Source: World Value Survey; own calculations. If an item was not asked in a country or not answered by a respondent, a dummy is included but not shown in this table. In both analyses it is controlled for socio-demographic variables and religious denominations as well. For this purpose the same variables as shown in table 1 are included but not shown here.

Only with regard to unemployment are the findings in line with our hypotheses and prior research. Many studies have shown that unemployment leads to a general deterioration of the social situation and the personal mood of those affected by it (Inglehart & Rabier, 1986, p. 20; Frey & Stutzer, 2002, p. 95ff.; Hayo & Seifert, 2003). The unemployed suffer in many regards: Their financial situation is bad, and they have the feeling of being socially "useless", of being hindered to apply and develop further their knowledge and capacities, of lacking a perspective for the future, thus, of having no control over their life circumstances (as shown already by the classical Austrian study by Jahoda et al. (1997), carried out in the 1930ies).

Also occupational status exerts significant effects on happiness. Here, many studies have shown that the semi- and unskilled workers continue to represent a deprived social class: Not only in terms of income and working conditions, but also in terms of little autonomy and influence at the workplace and in society (see Braverman, 1974; Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Hout et al., 1993, p. 263). The opposite is true for the managerial and professional groups. We have seen that they feel to have more freedom of control in their life. Yet, this freedom does not translate into a corresponding higher happiness. These results seem to corroborate those of an Australian study which found "that while high status fails greatly to enhance well-being, low status does generate a sense of ill-being." (Headey et al., 1984, p. 126) Overall, however, subjective well-being clearly does reflect vertical social inequality (see also Noll & Habich, 1990 and Schulz et al., 1988 for similar findings in Germany and Austria).

A variable whose importance for happiness has been stressed particularly by economists is income. In our data, the objective level of income has no significant effect on happiness (see also Frey & Stutzer, 2002, p. 73ff; Myers, 2000, p. 59ff.). However, the subjective perception of the financial situation has the strongest effect

on happiness and life satisfaction (see Headey et al., 1984, and Fuentes & Rojas, 2001 for similar findings). Our interpretation of this finding is not, however, in terms of relative deprivation – that people compare themselves only to others who live in similar circumstances. What is more important from our general theoretical point of view is the feeling if an income is adequate for mastering one's daily life. Men who grew up in poor families see that situation not only in terms of material deprivation, but as leading to "chaotic, arbitrary, and unpredictable behavior [...] in other words, as depriving men of the capacity to act rationally, to exercise self-control" (Sennett & Cobb, 1972, p. 22). In fact, this variable of the subjective estimation of one's financial situation had also a strong effect on the feeling of being free and autonomous in one's daily decisions.

The plausibility of this interpretation is confirmed by the finding that the objective level of income can be rather low without affecting happiness negatively. Two additional aspects may be relevant here. First, changes in income over time (Saris, 2001). An individual adapts himself to a certain level of income and therefore clearly feels a loss or an improvement at this level. Biswas-Diener and Diener (2001) carried out an interesting study on three very poor groups in Calcutta (slum dwellers, prostitutes and homeless individuals living on the streets); they found that these people were not as unhappy as one could expect; their life also included several positive aspects, such as rewarding families or religious commitments, the feeling of being "good (moral) people". Thus, the element of self-determination and freedom comes in here again. A second factor explaining the lack of an association between level of income and happiness has to do with attitudes toward income. People with materialistic orientations are less happy (Ryan & Dziurawiec, 2001). The striving toward becoming rich has no in-built limit and the psychic efforts and time investment necessary for it may turn away energies from other, more directly satisfying behavior patterns and styles of life.

*Subjective life situation and evaluation as determinants of happiness.* In table 2 three variables have been included in this regard: subjective class placement, subjective feeling of health, and satisfaction with the financial situation of the household. We have already seen that all these dimensions are highly relevant from the perspective of the individual feeling of freedom of decision. It turns out, that they also exert significant effects on happiness and life satisfaction. The effects of the subjective financial and health situation are by far the strongest of all variables in this analysis (for similar findings concerning health see Headey et al., 1984; Fuentes & Rojas, 2001). Finally, also the variable of freedom of decision as such has significant positive effects both on happiness and life satisfaction. Thus, the findings corroborate our central hypothesis also in this immediate regard.

In the foregoing section, we found that the perception of good chances for poor people to escape their lot was significantly related to the feeling of personal freedom. This kind of perception seems to be important for happiness and life satisfaction as well; persons who see their society as offering such chances are also more happy and satisfied with their own life.

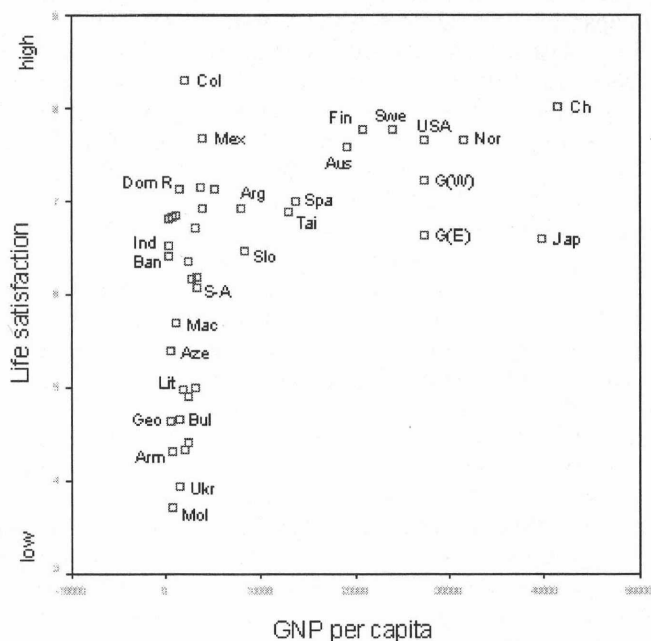
Thus, the findings suggest a clear overall interpretation of the findings concerning the effects of the personal situation and the immediate social context on happiness. Both the strong direct effect of freedom as well as of several other associations have shown that the amount of self-control in one's daily life contributes substantially to happiness and life satisfaction. Yet, a high degree of freedom evidently does

not automatically lead to happiness (as shown by the only moderate level of happiness among managers), and a moderate or below average level of freedom reduce happiness (as it is evident in the cases of students, housewives and retired people). We have to conclude from these findings that freedom and self-control on the one hand, and happiness and life satisfaction on the other are partly independent human goals and states.

Now, let us look at the effects of the macro-social variables on happiness, controlling for all other influences. The findings in table 2 of the multiple regression analysis provide a further confirmation of the dynamic action-theoretical approach developed in this paper. This approach does not consider the objective ("static") situation of an individual at a certain point in time as the main basis for his or her subjective evaluation of that situation but the way how a person feels to be able to cope with that situation, in view of past experiences and future expectations.

*The economic prospects of a country are very decisive, but also the objective level of wealth has an impact on happiness.* Here we find several effects. First, while GNP/head had no effect on the feeling of freedom, it has significant positive effects on happiness and life satisfaction. Even more important is the effect of economic growth during the 1990ies: If it was high, people not only felt more free (as shown earlier) but are happier and more satisfied with life as well (see also Hayo & Seifert, 2003).

Let us look at this relationship also in graphic form. Figure 5 shows the scattergram of nations according to GNP/head and the mean level of life satisfaction of their populations. By and large, there is no evidence of a clear linear correlation. The distribution approximates an exponential curve or curvilinear association (Frey & Stutzer, 2002 found a similar association; linear relations, however, are reported in Diener et al., 1995; Schyns, 1998). There exist three different groups: First, the post-communist societies with a rather low GNP/head and low happiness; second, the more developed and rich countries with relatively high levels of happiness; third, the very poor countries with a wide variation in happiness; these include the countries with the lowest (Moldavia) and the highest value in happiness (Colombia) in the whole sample. Thus, affluence seems to guarantee a certain level of satisfaction, but obviously there exist factors beside wealth which lead to happiness.

*Figure 5: GNP per Capita and Life Satisfaction in 41 Countries*

Source: World Value Survey 1995.

The positive effect of national economic wealth on happiness confirms many other studies; it is nevertheless surprising that the effect is not stronger given the extreme variation of standards of living in the countries compared. In Bangladesh and India, GNP/head was less than 400 US-\$ in the mid-Nineties, in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Pakistan around 500 \$. Switzerland, on the other hand, had a National Product a hundred times as much as these poor countries (41,000 \$); in Japan, Norway, Germany and the United States, GNP was around 30,000 \$. It is astonishing that these extreme income differences between countries (which, moreover, have increased over the last decades; see Milanovic, 2002) do not correlate more strongly with differences in people's life satisfaction. This clearly proves that pure materialistic-economic explanations of happiness would be wholly incomplete.

Surprising, and contrary to our hypothesis, are the findings concerning the effects of income distribution (measured by the GINI-index). Table 2 shows that it also has no effect on life satisfaction and happiness. This finding becomes plausible when we look at the countries with regard to overall inequality. Far on top in this regard are the South American countries which, at the same time, are characterized by very high levels of happiness; a rather low level of income inequality, however, is typical for the post-communist countries which, at the same time, are characterized by the lowest levels of happiness of their citizens. Our findings in this regard seem to confirm liberal critiques of an excessive and enforced egalitarianism, such as the economist Friedrich Hayek (1960) or the sociologist Helmut Schoeck (1960).

These findings also make sense seen from the perspective of John Rawls' "liberal" theory of justice. This theory asserts that inequality is tolerable if it is combined with positive perspectives for an improvement of all and, thus, also acceptable to the less privileged groups (Rawls, 1972; Methfessel & Winterberg, 1998).

Already in the last sections, we found that the possibility of an improvement of the overall economic situation is a very important fact besides the issues of present poverty and inequality. Table 2 also shows that the growth of the GDP over the Nineties had a significant and rather strong effect on happiness. There exist strong positive and nearly linear associations<sup>8</sup> between economic growth and the feelings of freedom and happiness/life satisfaction at the macro level. Also changes in levels of inflation are correlated significantly with happiness over time (Frey & Stutzer, 2002, p. 111ff.). These correlations probably help to explain the striking result that happiness is rather high in most Latin American countries, but very low in the post-communist Eastern European countries. The Latin American countries had rather high growth rates during the Nineties (between 3 and 8 %). In contrast, the Eastern European countries and the successor states of the former Soviet Union experienced sharp declines in standards of living connected with their transition from centrally planned, state socialist systems to market societies (with decreases of GNP between 3 and 10 %). In a survey on ten post-communist East European countries in the early Nineties, Hayo & Seifert (2003) found that only between 17 % (Poland) and 58 % (Czech Republic) of the respondents considered their economic household situation as satisfactory, compared with 86 % in Austria; only 35-50 % expected an improvement (except Croatia with 70 %). Evidently, the future economic perspectives of a country make people optimistic also about their own situation; they give them the feeling that opportunities are there and it is also in their own discretion how their situation will develop. People in Latin America score highest in the WVS-item "work makes life worth living" as well.

*Political freedom is no decisive determinant for individual life satisfaction within the population.* Table 2 shows, finally, that the macro dimension of political freedom does not have the expected positive effect on happiness (such an effect did also not turn out with regard to subjectively felt freedom). The consideration was that in stable democratic systems and free market societies, both individual households and enterprises can rely on trustful and reliable relations to other people and organizations, as well as to the state and its officials; this would enhance their individual possibilities of long-term planning. Frey and Stutzer (2002, p. 133ff; see also Schyns, 1998) have argued that instruments of direct democracy, like referenda, can considerably enlarge the real political freedom and influence of the citizens; for Switzerland they show that the degree of participation in the different provinces (cantons) has a significant effect on the happiness of the people living there. Switzerland as a whole occupies a top position among all countries compared in this paper with regard to political and economic freedom and happiness of the population. Yet, in a worldwide sample freedom as such seems not to make a big difference. The individual feeling of being in command of one's life, as well as happiness and life satisfaction, seem to be relatively independent from political circumstances; what counts more is a dynamic economic development in the past and positive economic perspectives for the future.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let us first summarize shortly the main findings, relate them to some other studies, and then draw some conclusions about further research. First, it can be said that our general hypothesis could be confirmed clearly, stating that individual happiness depends on the degree of freedom and choice an individual feels to have in his life. This finding is corroborated by earlier studies. Headey and associates (1984, p. 128) found that "personal competence (a feeling that one can control and organise one's life)" related most strongly to indices of positive and negative well-being. In a German study, Schulz et al. (1981), carried out a factor analysis of 42 variables relating to happiness. They found one factor which they called "happiness through freedom"; it included feelings of independence and freedom, the capacity to enjoy life, and to feel light-hearted and carefree.

By and large, our second hypothesis was also confirmed, stating that people will be more happy if they live in personal and societal circumstances providing them with more freedom of individual choice. Strong effects in this regard could be found for subjective health, satisfaction with the personal financial situation and for the perceived chances of an economic improvement of one's own situation in the future. Regarding economic well-being, it seems to be less the objective level of personal income or the objective level of wealth of a nation which is most relevant for happiness, but rather a positive economic development (economic growth) in the past and similar perspectives for the future.

We got only limited support, however, for our third and fourth hypotheses, stating that happiness will be higher in more open, democratic and in less stratified nations. Especially the situation in the Latin American countries contradicts our hypotheses on the relation between equality and happiness. These countries are characterized by the highest degrees of income inequality among all countries in our sample, but – at the same time – their population is among the happiest around the world.

There exist at least two explanations for these findings. First, we have to differentiate between the situation in the personal life context and in society as a whole. It turns out that satisfaction with one's immediate life circumstances is much higher than satisfaction with the state of a nation as a whole (similar findings were reported for Australia in Eckersley, 2000, and for Germany in Glatzer & Zapf, 1984). In the worldwide *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, which asked about satisfaction with one's own life, one's nation and the world as a whole, the percentages satisfied declined clearly from the lowest to the highest level.<sup>10</sup> This decline of happiness can be explained very well within our framework which sees freedom of decision as an important variable mediating happiness: The smaller and more immediate the social context, the more possibilities an individual has to decide by himself, or herself about ongoing actions and to control the course of events; the larger this context, the less this is the case. Here, we can also refer to the marked tendency of men and women in general, to see one's own performance as being above average (Headey & Wearing, 1988).

Second, it is evident that there must exist other, positive determinants of happiness besides the affluence of a nation and its overall patterns of distribution. Here, we have to mention close personal and social relations whose significance for happiness has been noted by classical writers such as Tocqueville, Durkheim, or Tönnies.



nies. Barry Schwartz (2000) has recently argued that there exists an inherent tension between trying to be fully autonomous and free, and the wish for meaningful involvement in social groups. Also the striving for and attainment of material, extrinsic goods must not always increase happiness, but may also lead to new problems, such as envious competition, conflicts of decision, time stress and even depression and suicides (Zahn, 1960; Schoeck, 1960; Inglehart & Rabier, 1986; Etzioni, 1995; Eckersley, 2000; Schwartz, 2000).

From this point of view, an additional explanation can be given for the extremely low level of happiness in the poorer post-communist countries. With its over-emphasis on state intervention and provision, the communist system destroyed many private forms of networks and support and spontaneous, private forms of association. The far-reaching control of public opinion may have created a high level of distrust between citizens (Lewada, 1992). The data of the *World Value Survey* show that active religious participation is lowest in those countries, and people say least frequently that friends are very important. So, these findings point again to the fact that a certain level of individual freedom is indispensable for happiness. In this regard, we can conclude with Ruut Veenhoven (1999, p. 175) that "individualization enhances quality of life" (see also Boudon, 2002). Thus, one of the most interesting questions for research, following from our findings would be: Which are the combinations of individual freedom and social embedding which provide optimal conditions for subjective well-being?

A further promising new line of research would be that of carrying out in-depth studies on the factors that make people quite unhappy in some countries, and which make people very happy in other societies, especially in rather poor countries (such as in Latin America). Such research would be in line with the theoretical argument of a dual structure of happiness and mental health. According to this theory, happiness is more than just the absence of unhappiness or problems; it results only from positive self-concept dimensions and life experiences (Headey et al., 1984; Argyle, 1987; Haller, 1981; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001; Vittersø & Nielsen, 2002). Such research would also balance the fact that the social sciences are focusing too much on negative issues and social problems, but neglect the positive factors contributing to growth, development and happiness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Finally, the research on the positive factors of happiness in poor countries would be highly relevant from the viewpoint of the most advanced and rich societies themselves. Here, established habits and life styles have to be changed and new ones invented which will be more in line with sustainable societal and ecological development for the world as a whole (Schulz, 1995).

## NOTES

- 1 Thanks are expressed to the researchers who have carried out the World Value Survey in their respective countries as well as all those – especially Ronald Inglehart – who have contributed to the design of this highly valuable data set. Data sets have been delivered to us by the Central Archive, University of Cologne (Germany).
- 2 In this regard, the *International Social Survey Programme* (ISSP) might be stronger. Its modules, however, are more limited in their substantive range.
- 3 We tested empirically if this lack of nation-wide sampling made a difference by correlating the scores in the dependent variables "happiness" and "life satisfaction" between the overall samples and the subsamples of only city dwellers in all countries. The correlation coefficients were as high as .99, thus indicating that the differences are negligible.

- 4 For Spain, for instance, the survey included separately four provinces (Andalusia, Basque country, Galicia, Valencia), for Russia, three subsamples were covered (Russia, Moscow, Tambov).
- 5 The data are available under <http://www.freedomhouse.org>.
- 6 One reader of this paper argued that we should consider additional indicators for freedom at the societal level. We introduced an index of "economic freedom", developed by the Heritage Foundation (Miles et al. 2004). This index varies from 1.94 (Switzerland) to 4.78 (Azerbaijan). Highly rated in economic freedom are West-European and Anglo-Saxon countries; at the bottom (values over 3.50) we find most less-developed post-communist countries, China, India, Bangladesh and Peru. Between this index and GNP/head, however, exists a rather strong connection and if we introduce it into the regression, the effects of either GNP/head or growth of GNP disappear. Thus, we decided not to include this additional index for "economic freedom" into the models in table 1.
- 7 Concerning freedom, we use here the aggregated mean values from the WVS. In the multivariate analysis, an "external", independent measure is used. (See text below)
- 8 Pearson correlation coefficients are: growth x freedom: .62; growth x happiness: -.69; growth x life satisfaction: .77.
- 9 Income inequality, as measured by the GINI coefficient, lies between extremely high values of .45 and .60 in the South American countries, but only between .20 and .40 in most other countries and regions.
- 10 What the World Thinks in 2002, *The Pew Global Attitudes Project*, Washington, D.C.; see: <http://www.people-press.org>.

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